

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. President,

Reporters Without Borders would like to share with you its concerns ahead of your meeting with King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia this Friday. We ask that you make Saudi Arabia's dismal human rights record, specifically concerning freedom of information, a focal topic during your talks with the King. Although your discussion with King Salman will no doubt center around the United States' nuclear agreement with Iran, we ask that you remind Saudi Arabia of its obligation to respect press freedom both in the Kingdom and in countries where it exercises considerable influence.

Saudi Arabia is ranked 164 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index. Within their own territory, the Saudi Arabian authorities are currently responsible for the imprisonment of 8 journalists, 1 professional and 7 citizen journalists. The most notable of these prisoners is without a doubt Raif Badawi. This Saudi blogger was awarded the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Prize in 2014. Badawi has been detained since June 17, 2012 for merely creating an online discussion forum. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes, a sentence which was upheld in June 2015 and can no longer be appealed in court. After publicly receiving his first 50 lashes in January 2015, doctors determined he was in such poor health that future lashings had to be postponed. Although this diagnosis has spared him up until now, the fact that an appeal of his conviction is no longer possible means that this barbaric punishment could resume at any moment.

Badawi's situation is merely one example of Saudi Arabia's brutal response to any voice deemed too liberal by the royal family and religious authorities. Badawi's own lawyer and creator of the Saudi Monitor for Human Rights, Waleed Abu al-Khair, was arrested in 2014 on vague, trumped up charges of "antagonizing international organizations against the Kingdom" and "incitement of public opinion against authorities." Wajdi Al-Ghazzawi, the owner of *Al-Fajr TV* and host of a program called "Al-Fadfada," was sentenced to 12 years in prison in February 2014 for accusing Saudi Arabia of links with terrorism and Al-Qaeda in particular. He was also banned from leaving the country for 20 years after completing his jail sentence and from ever appearing on television again. Another journalist, Mukhlif Al-Shammari, was sentenced to 2 years' imprisonment and 200 lashes on November 3, 2014. He had also been sentenced in July 2014 to 5 years in prison for broadcasting a YouTube video of two young girls recounting stories of their ill treatment, as well as for other articles Al-Shammari had written in the past. He spent a few months in prison and was later released but he is still forbidden from publishing or appearing in the media and leaving the country for 10 years.

Since the country's criminal law is based on Sharia, everything is left to the discretion of the authorities. This means barbaric punishment and ill treatment of prisoners are the norm. Furthermore, the government makes use of its harsh cybercrime and counterterrorism laws to prosecute and imprison journalists and citizen-journalists, while closely controlling and censoring online information and independent media outlets.

Reporters Without Borders has time and time again urged the Saudi Arabian authorities to release journalists and other human rights defenders in prison by writing letters to members of the Saudi royal family and to other heads of state. In a letter we sent to Saudi leadership last July, along with other human rights organizations, we highlighted our concern that the situation of detained human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia is inconsistent with the United Nations provisions set forth in the "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners." We also unequivocally stated that "all laws that unlawfully limit or restrict freedom of expression through the traditional media or social media networks" should be abolished. None of the human rights organizations that signed onto this letter has ever received a reply from the Saudi Arabian authorities.

We ask you now to press the King on these vital issues during your talks on Friday. As a strategic Middle East partner of the United States, Saudi Arabia must take your human rights concerns seriously and begin to implement change. Saudi Arabia must immediately release all journalists from prison and drop all charges against them.

I thank you in advance, Mr. President, for the attention you give to this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line.

Christophe Deloire
Secretary-General

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has become the largest press freedom organization around the world and is celebrating 30 years of accomplishments. We are headquartered in Paris with an office in Washington, DC.

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